

English for Engineering Students in Tamilnadu - Self-assessment and Self-learning of Listening Skills

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Abstract

This paper suggests that the English teachers in engineering colleges should periodically test their own listening skills in English. The paper focuses on self-assessment and self-learning of their listening skills in English, by the teachers as well as the students. This call for self-assessment of our own listening skills in English may be applied both to English as well as other subject teachers, since both the categories employ English to teach their subjects. Our position is that when teachers have great listening skills, they will be able to impart quality instruction and also quality listening skills to their students. It is important that the non-English subject teachers also take some interest in improving their own as well as their students' English language skills.

Key words: Listening skills, self-assessment, English teachers, non-English subject teachers, student self-assessment, variety of listening materials.

Introduction

Listening is a basic language skill. This is one among the four basic language skills – listening, speaking, reading and writing. There are many ways to approach and describe listening skill. For example, it is widely accepted that these four skills may be classified into two broad categories: Productive or active (speaking and writing) and Receptive or passive (listening and reading) skills. Yet listening cannot be correctly and fully characterized only as a passive skill. Thirumalai (2002) points out that all language skills are interdependent “even though they can be taught independently to some extent,” and so both teachers and students may aim at exploiting all language skills in an integrated manner. Our classroom instruction and activities within and

outside the classroom should include “interactive (listening to a message and doing something as a consequence) and one-way communication or non-interactive (just listening and retaining the message, in activities such as conversations overheard, public address announcements, recorded messages, and so on) and self-talk.”

Other Ways to Look at Listening Skills

There are also other ways to look at the listening skill. For example, Isa Engleberg and Dianna Wynn would suggest the following types of learning (*Working in Groups*, Houghton Mifflin College Div., 2006):

Listening to Hear

Listening to Understand

Listening to Remember

Listening to Interpret

Listening to Evaluate

Listening to Respond

Thus there are several ways to describe the processes of listening. Active participation of the teachers and students in every speech event is helpful. One of the ways to get prepared to actively participate in listening is to do some self-assessment of the quality of our listening skills.

Self-assessment

http://www.nova.edu/yoursuccess/forms/listening_inventory.pdf offers a self-assessment inventory. This asks the following questions. We are expected to give our responses using a five point scale: ☐Almost always ☐Often ☐Sometimes ☐Seldom ☐Almost Never

1. I want to listen to what others have to say when they are talking.
2. I do not listen attentively when others are talking.
3. By listening, I can guess a speaker’s intent or purpose without being told.
4. I have a purpose for listening when others are talking.

5. I keep control of my biases and attitudes when listening to others speak, so that these factors won't affect my interpretation of the message.
6. I analyze my listening errors so as not to make them again.
7. I listen to the complete message before making judgments about what the speaker has said.
8. I cannot tell when a speaker's biases or attitudes are affecting his or her message.
9. I ask questions when I don't fully understand a speaker's message.
10. I am aware of whether or not a speaker's meaning of words and concepts is the same as mine.

Constant Effort

We'd recommend that all teachers of English as well as teachers of other subjects taught through English make some self-assessment. Depending on our results or scores, we should be able to make some conscious effort to improve our listening.

Students in the engineering colleges may be given this list and asked to fill this in with honest responses. Students can do this filling in every semester to check whether they have improved their listening skills over the semesters. Administering such a list of questions, we believe, is less intrusive and students and teachers would make conscious effort to improve their listening skills.

We all should really do our best to improve our listening skill every day.

Some Additional Suggestions

1. Do our best not to get distracted by conversations around us, or by day to day personal problems. We must make conscious effort to shut out distractions.
2. Do our best to ask questions when we do not understand what is said, what is communicated through speech.

3. Do our best to write down the words of our teacher or speaker in a meeting, words which we do not recognize. This should lead us to check the words in the dictionary.
4. Do our best to assess in our mind whether the speaker is telling the truth or is trustworthy.
5. Do our best to summarize the major points in our mind when a speaker addresses us. Do we do it using the words already known to us?
6. Do we focus on the main ideas when we listen to the speaker?
7. Do our best to understand what is actually said and what is actually implied.
8. Do our best to check with the speaker whether our understanding of what he or she said is correct. Only after this process, we should form our opinions, conclusions, and such.
9. Do our best to understand the message delivered, with utmost concentration.
10. Do our best to pay full attention to what the speaker is saying. No texting, not jokes, no soft words spoken to our neighbor in the meeting.
11. Do our best to understand the English spoken by other ethnic communities in India and not make fun of their pronunciation of sounds, intonation, words, sentences, etc. Do our best to interpret what they mean, and do our best not to hesitate to ask for the meaning of words, which people from other cultures use to communicate through English. Be polite. Never give an impression you are making fun of them. Remember all ethnic groups have their own accent in India and yet we are able to understand each other, even when we speak English with our own accents.
12. Do our best to watch body language and facial expressions of speakers. These may give us more information and more understanding of what the speaker wants to communicate.

13. Do our best to always give positive non-verbal expressions such as nodding, eye contact, oral agreement, etc. These would help the speaker to move forward with what he or she wants to communicate. It would also be polite behavior.

14. Do our best to maintain eye contact with the speaker or with those to whom we speak.

15. Do our best to focus on the message, not on the speaker or the teacher.

16. Do our best to listen to complex and long sentences and arrive at the correct meaning of these sentences.

17. Do our best not to stop listening if the speaker is talking about a subject that we do not like.

Easily Available Sources to Improve Our Listening Skills

Let us ask our students to choose an Indian TV news channel which telecasts news and group discussions, interviews, etc., using English. Let them begin listening to the news at least three times in a week. Let them write down a summary of what they listened to. To begin with, they can list the words and phrases they had difficulty with in understanding when the news is telecast. Then soon a brief summary of the news they listened. Both these activities will be self-initiated. They will check with the dictionary, etc. to get the meaning. They will write down the summary what they listened to, but may not submit it to the teacher. We could leave it to their personal assessment as to how they have improved their listening and understanding in a few months. Our main goal should be to develop a habit of listening to English, initially Indian Standard English as used in TV telecasts.

Next level, students may be encouraged to watch movies in English produced both in India and in Hollywood, etc. Watching movies offers them total immersion and total listening. Again such immersion will develop their patience to listen to long English conversations and an effort to understand both the content and the pronunciation, etc. Our goal is comprehension, not imitation of spoken language.

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In other words, most of the activities for listening should be in the realm of hobbies, not enforced in testing contexts. Continuous listening on regular basis will help improve our listening skills. When the students graduate and obtain their engineering degree they will have achieved adequate listening skills both for use in India and in foreign countries where English is used for business purposes.

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